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March 27, 1967

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MEMORANDUM FOR

The President

I have been following the negotiation sequence very closely and have reached the conclusion that we are no longer fighting a "war" in Vietnam--we are fighting a "negotiation."

This is not intended as a cute play on words--on the contrary, it has serious consequences for American policy.

At the risk of boring you, let me set out the assumptions on which this is based:

1. Ho Chi Minh is not just a radical nationalist like Toure, Castro, or Sukarno. He is a dedicated Leninist, the last of the first generation of the Communist International.

2. He is therefore not a simple-minded Vietnamese chauvinist who, for example, will "not negotiate under pressure." I was in the Air Force too long to believe all I read about the effectiveness of bombing. But the view that Ho will not negotiate until we stop bombing is nonsense.

--it might be true of Castro, who is basically a romantic Latin fascist, a "petty-bourgeois sentimental" in Communist jargon;

--but Ho--like Lenin at the time of Brest-Litovsk--would negotiate in cold blood for whatever goals he considers realistic--even if bombs were coming down his chimney.

3. The behavior of a dedicated, intelligent Leninist is highly predictable. I never doubted that Khrushchev would pull the missiles out of Cuba in October 1962 (see my letter to the then Senator Humphrey at Tab A).

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4. A good Leninist looks on the use of force as merely a variety of politics. He never adopts an inflexible "unconditional surrender" position, but is always ready to alter the timetable if the costs of overt aggression become too high.

5. On the basis of various statements that have been emerging from Hanoi over the past six months, as well as articles in Hoc Tap, and other Communist organs in Hanoi, I am convinced that Ho knows that the road to victory in South Vietnam by overt aggression is closed.

6. He is therefore willing to shift from overt war to negotiations, with the latter in no way compromising his determination to someday "unify" Vietnam. Negotiations are a weapons system at which Ho is an expert (see his performance between the French and the Chinese from 1946-49 or his 1949-53 moves with the French).

7. This willingness to shift gears created trouble for Lenin and has undoubtedly created internal difficulties for Ho. My guess is that he released the exchange of letters to show the hard-liners he is still tough. There is probably a "negotiate-now" faction in Hanoi and he rhetorically disassociated himself from them.

8. But the real issue is Ho's authority: his capacity to free himself from factional control and be completely "opportunist"--in Lenin's use of the word, i.e., maintain the right to seize the utilize any opportunity that arises.

9. Assuming that Ho has adopted a tactic of negotiation (no Leninist looks on negotiations as valuable in themselves), but does not think now is the time to move, the release of the exchange of letters makes sense in terms of maintaining his freedom of maneuver.

10. Under what circumstances can we expect him to actually implement this tactic of negotiation?

At the worst possible time in terms of American internal unity--say on September 1, 1968. Recall that in dealing with the French in 1953, Ho waited until France was in a state of almost total political chaos over the European Defense Community to float his offer to negotiate.

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11. What this comes down to is a rejection of the newspaper view that Hanoi is full of parochial primitives who do not "understand the United States."

Let us rather assume:

- 1) That they know exactly what they are doing;
- 2) That they are now out to win a negotiation;
- 3) That they recall both Panmunjon and two Genevas;
- 4) That they believe their maximum retrieval can be accomplished when the American people are really hurting and have a chance to bring real pressure directly on the presidential election;
- 5) That their present "insane" military operations are designed not to "win" the war, or to cut I Corps off from the rest of Vietnam, but simply to kill more Americans at whatever cost in North Vietnamese. To a dedicated old Bolshevik a weekly headline in the Times "U.S. Deaths Reach New All Time High" is worth 5,000 dead peasants from the PAVN.
- 6) That, in short, Ho is not counting on the peaceniks but on the isolationists in the United States and believes (correctly) that coffins are more significant propaganda than leaflets. And he also believes that we will not invade, really destroy, or try to liberate the DRV, so he can outwait us in his political sanctuary.

12. This is getting too long, and it may be fantasy, but I think we have to be prepared for such a contingency. In practice, it is not enough to have Governor Harriman ready to sit down anywhere, any time. The key question is "What is he going to say?"

Suppose, sometime next year, Ho surfaces with a "Laotian solution"? (Recent captured documents hint at this possibility--see Tab B.) Are we prepared to go for the principle of tripartite rule in SVN? Tripartism was a phony in Laos from the moment the 1962 agreement was signed, but it covered a de facto military partition which we and the Communists were prepared to live with.

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When we say, therefore, that we are willing to go back to the 1962 Geneva agreement, we mean neutralization under great power guarantees, a stabilization.

But suppose Ho says, in the middle of a presidential campaign: "Fine, let's apply the 1962 Geneva principle to South Vietnam." The pressure to accept would be enormous, but acceptance would mean "coalition government" in Saigon, legitimation of the NLF, and break the back of our moral/military commitment.

Which, finally, accounts for the Saigon reaction to Ambassador Bunker. The South Vietnamese leaders are no dumber than those in Hanoi and they have good memories. They have seen the gallows (to paraphrase Dr. Johnson) and it has most wonderfully clarified their thought.

If you put yourself in Ky's shoes, and listened to some of your advisors relate matters of recent history in Asia, Ellsworth Bunker could easily be seen as the man who implemented Bobby Kennedy's policy of "appeasement" of Sukarno.

You would then probably ask the question: "Bobby Kennedy has come out for 'coalition,' Harriman was the architect of Laos, 1962, where does Bunker stand?"

And you might well lie awake nights worrying about the "inscrutable Americans."

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